

**ORAL STATEMENT OF
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DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY
SUBCOMMITTEE ON INVESTIGATIONS AND
OVERSIGHT
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**SEPTEMBER 9, 2008
(658 Words)**

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee on
Science and Technology:

Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to appear
before you today. My name is Dr. Mona Melhem, and I
have been a practicing physician and pathologist in the
Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Pittsburgh Healthcare
System (VAPHS) since 1986. I am also a Professor in the
Department of Pathology at the University of Pittsburgh,
School of Medicine. I am a board certified Anatomic and

Clinical Pathologist with Special Qualification in Hematopathology. I have published more than 150 articles in peer reviewed journals and ^{published abstracts of research} presented research at both national and international conferences. For the past 22 years, I have taken on greater clinical and administrative responsibility within the Pathology and Lab medicine services. I began my current position as Associate Chief of Staff and Vice President of the Clinical Support Service line in 2001. In this capacity, I am responsible for Pathology and Lab medicine, including the clinical, microbiology and Special Pathogens Labs.

In January 2006, acting in my oversight capacity, I requested a routine review of the clinical productivity and financial expenditures of the Special Pathogens Lab. This lab was chartered in the early 1980s as a clinical resource for VA. The lab was to be financially independent and to serve the clinical needs of VAPHS and other VA medical centers in what was then an emerging field. Based on this review, it was clear the lab was not productive and was a drain on clinical resources. This led me to the decision to

consolidate the Special Pathogens Lab's functions into the main clinical microbiology labs in the main building.

of Note: The chief of infectious disease, by law, cannot be also named chief of microbiology lab as this constitutes a conflict of interest or self referral
In preparation for the Lab's closing, I ordered lab personnel to move all recognizable, catalogued, and well-marked, intact tubes and specimens to the main laboratories to ensure our patients' confidentiality and the specimens' integrity. There were several efforts to enlist the cooperation of the director of the Special Pathogens Lab, but to no avail.

DR Yu's testimony attested that some of organisms were sent to the sp lab from all over the world
Upon the Special Pathogen Director's departure, we found a freezer filled with unidentifiable biological materials and microorganisms. There was simply no way of knowing the specimens' risk or danger. Special pathogens are infectious agents that produce serious disease in humans, and so in July 2006, in the interests of public safety and the health of our veterans, we requested the Vice President of Facility Management coordinate the disposal of hazardous material and the immediate cleaning of the Special Pathogens Lab. These steps were consistent with

established procedures and guidelines followed by both public and private laboratories across the world which dictate that unknown remaining specimens must be disposed of as soon as possible.

I was not aware of any efforts by the staff of the Special Pathogens Lab to transfer any samples to qualified labs at the University of Pittsburgh. Sometime around September 2006, roughly one month after the closure of the lab, I had an informal conversation with the Associate Chief of Staff for Research and Development about specimens that were preserved after the lab closure. I stated at that time that we preserved specimens we knew to be part of an approved research protocol or were otherwise able to identify.

On December 4, 2006, I asked lab personnel about the status of the remaining samples. Based on my earlier instructions, I believed they had already been properly destroyed. I was informed there maybe some biohazardous material remaining in Building 2, where the

This lab
Special Pathogens Lab was located. Since ~~Building 2~~ had
been closed since July 2006, I ordered an extensive
cleaning and disposal process of all remaining
unidentifiable, broken or abandoned tubes.

Mr. Chairman, that concludes my statement, I am
prepared to answer any questions you may have.

*Night of July 19 - July 20
for Court*